Life in a World of Pervasive Immorality: The Ethics of Being Alive

I used to think I was a pretty good person. I certainly didn't kill people, for example. But then Peter Singer pointed out that animals were conscious and that eating them led them to be killed and that wasn't all that morally different from killing people after all. So I became a vegetarian.

Again I thought I was a pretty good person. But then Arianna Huffington told me that by driving in a car I was pouring toxic fumes into the air and sending money to foreign dictatorships. So I got a bike instead.

But then I realized that my bike seat was sewn by children in foreign sweatshops while its tubing was made by mining metals through ripping up the earth. Indeed, any money I spent was likely to go to oppressing people or destroying the planet in one way or another. And if I happen to make money some of it goes to the government which spends it blowing people up in Afghanistan or Iraq.

I thought about just living off of stuff I found in dumpsters, like some friends. That way I wouldn't be responsible for encouraging its production. But then I realized that some people buy the things they can't find in dumpsters; if I got to the dumpster and took something before they did, they might buy it instead.

The solution seemed clear: I'd have to go off-the-grid and live in a cave, gathering nuts and berries. I'd still probably be exhaling CO2 and using some of the products in the Earth, but probably only in levels that were sustainable.

Perhaps you disagree with me that it's morally wrong to kill animals or blow up people in Afghanistan. But surely you can imagine that it *might* be, or at least that someone could think it is. And I think it's similarly clear that eating a hamburger or paying taxes contributes — in a very small way; perhaps only has the possibility of contributing — to those things.

Even if you don't, everyday life has a million ways that are more direct. Personally, I think it's wrong that I get to sit at a table and gaily devour while someone else delivers more food to my table and a third person slaves over a stove. Every time I order food, I make them do more carrying and slaving. (Perhaps they get some money in return, but surely they'd prefer it if I just gave them the money.) Again, you may not think this wrong but I hope you can admit the possibility. And it's obviously my fault.

Off in the cave, I thought I was safe. But then I read [Peter Singer's latest book](). He points out that for as little as a quarter, you can save a child's life. (E.g. for 27 cents you can buy the oral rehydration salts that will save a child from fatal diarrhea.) Perhaps I was killing people after all.

I couldn't morally make money, for the reasons described above. (Although maybe it's worth helping fund the bombing of children in Afghanistan in order to help save children in Mozambique.) But instead of living in a cave, I could go to Africa and volunteer my time.

Of course, if I do that there are a thousand other things I'm not doing. How can I decide which action I take will save the most lives? Even if I take the time to figuring out, that's time I'm spending on myself instead of saving lives.

It seems impossible to be moral. Not only does everything I do cause great harm, but so does everything I don't do. Standard accounts of morality assume that it's difficult, but attainable: don't lie, don't cheat, don't steal. But it seems like living a moral life isn't even possible.

But if morality is unattainable, surely I should simply do the best I can. (Ought implies can, after all.) Peter Singer is a good utilitarian, so perhaps I should try to maximize the good I do for the world. But even this seems like an incredibly onerous standard. I should not just stop eating meat, but animal products altogether. I shouldn't just stop buying factory-farmed food, I should stop buying altogether. I should take things out of dumpsters other people are unlikely to be searching. I should live someplace where others won't be disturbed.

Of course all this worrying and stress is preventing me from doing any good in the world. I can hardly take a step without thinking about who it hurts. So I decide not to worry about the bad I might be doing and just focus on doing good — screw the rules.

But this doesn't just apply to the rules inspired by Peter Singer. Waiting in line at the checkout counter is keeping me from my life-saving work (and paying will cost me life-saving money) — better just to shoplift. Lying, cheating, any crime can be similarly justified.

It seems paradoxical: in my quest to do good I've justified doing all sorts of bad. Nobody questioned me when I went out and ordered a juicy steak, but when I shoplift soda everyone recoils. Is there sense in following their rules or are they just another example of the world's pervasive immorality? Have any philosophers considered this question?

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